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ABSTRACT

Conjectural outcomes of the passage of a recently proposed constitutional amendment to make English the official language of Texas may be compared to the actual linguistic situation in Belgium. Following the revolt led by French-speaking Walloons in 1830, French was used for all national laws and decrees in Belgium as well as for secondary and university education. The Flemish sought to redress the linguistic imbalance, however, and a series of laws passed throughout the 1930s mandated that the nation would be of two tongues, although the people as a whole would not be bilingual. In 1962-63, the enactment of the Linguistic and Education Laws established permanent linguistic boundaries. Major libraries have had great difficulty coping with the resultant linguistic tension, both in terms of achieving international cooperation and obtaining government funding, which is allocated by region and cannot be combined for joint projects. An examination of the effects of the language dispute on the Catholic University of Louvain, the public library of Brussels, and the Royal Library of Belgium points out the problems presented by Belgian linguistic regulations. Belgium is living proof that language frontiers are not natural and that they bring more harm than protection where they are artificially erected. (KM)

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LIBRARIES AND BILINGUALISM IN BELGIUM

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by

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In the recent debate over the proposed constitutional amendment making English the official language of Texas, much has been made of how strict observance of such a ruling would affect everything from the names of towns and streets, to such mundane things as restaurant menus. A recent article in The Texas Observer parodied this with an excerpt from a so-called English-only history of Texas, or as it would be called, "Friendly," describing the battle of the "cottonwood," against the forces of General St. Ann, in the city of St. Anthony.(1) This kind of linguistic twist would not be a joke in Belgium. In Brussels, every publicly displayed sign must be given in both languages. Road signs in north or south Belgium, pointing to cities in the other region, must give the name of the city in that region's language, whether or not it is the commonly-used name. This has led to such things as the name "Bergen" being used in the place of "Mons" for road signs pointing to this large, French-speaking city in the Flemish north, in spite of the fact that Bergen is a name used by neither Flemish nor French. But Bergen is the exact translation of Mons, or "mountain," into Flemish, in the same way that Alamo means cottonwood.

Belgium is relatively small country in northwestern Europe, covering about 11,781 square miles, or roughly the size of Maryland. It is the most densely populated country on the

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European continent, with 879 people per square mile. A significant fact about modern Belgium is that it can be divided into almost exact north/south halves, the north, Flanders, inhabited by the Flemish, who speak a dialect of Dutch, the south, Wallonia, inhabited by the Walloons, who speak French. During the late middle ages, Flanders was the richer and more powerful of the two regions, and Flemish was a relatively important European language. After the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Flemish commercial influence was broken. The region was under the domination of foreign rulers for two hundred years, until achieving independence in 1830. The leaders of the Belgian revolt were Walloons, Francophone members of the propertied and professional classes. The Constitution that this group wrote in 1831 was ambiguous about the status of the languages of the country. However, an earlier decree, promulgated soon after the 1830 Revolution, provided that the national laws and decrees would be only in French at first, and translation made later into Flemish, and then German, for the tiny German-speaking minority in Eastern Belgium. The elites of the country all spoke French, the generally accepted international language of the time; it seemed only a short step to linguistic unity of the whole country. Flemish, with its multitude of mutually incomprehensible local dialects, already seemed sinking into the backwaters with Picard, Burgundian, and other remnants of medieval European languages. Instruction in Flemish was not included in the new school program, even at the primary level. All secondary and university education, the sole route to social and economic

advancement, was entirely in French (2).

From the Flemish standpoint, most subsequent history represents an attempt to redress this linguistic imbalance. Throughout the nineteenth century the Flemish Cultural Council and other Flemish cultural and nationalistic groups worked to reestablish the right of Flemish school districts to conduct first primary, and then secondary schools in Flemish. The University of Ghent was founded in 1930 in an attempt to provide Flemish university-level instruction. Flemish was proclaimed the second national language in 1898, but the majority of Flemings still had most of their instruction in French until the passing of the Education Act of 1932, which established the principle of territoriality in education, that school instruction should be given in the dominant language of the region in which each child lived.

During the 1930's, the tenor of the Flemish movement became increasingly nationalistic. The earlier groups had demanded only bilingualism, with Flemish given equal parity with French in Flanders, but when the reverse of this, equal instruction of Flemish given to Francophones in Wallonia, was refused by the Walloons, the attempt at integral bilingualism was abandoned. A series of laws throughout the 1930's gave Flemish equality with French in the administration, primary and secondary education, the courts, and the army. The nation would be of two tongues, but neither the civil service nor the people as a whole would be bilingual. Only Brussels, a French-speaking island in Brabant, a Flemish province, and some areas along the linguistic frontier would be officially bilingual. While there would be instruction in the "other" language in each section of the country, Flanders

and Wallonia would be unilingual.

The most important event in recent history to affect the linguistic partitioning of Belgium has been the inactment of the so-called Linguistic and Education Laws in 1962-1963. These fixed the linguistic borders in the country permanently- the 1932 laws had regarded the borders as fluid and subject to revision. The boundaries were based on the 1947 census--a situation that is still in effect, in spite of the claims of some Francophones in the Brussels suburbs that they live in communes with 50% or 60% French-speaking populations that are legally considered to be unilaterally Flemish. According to the report issued at the time, "intellectual life, education, and adminstration must be unilingual" (3). The personal element is sacrificed for the territorial element.

In effect, all culture and education in Belgium takes place within one linguistic community or another. Instruction in the "second language" is mandatory for all pupils, and all Belgians educated after the mid-1960's should theoretically speak both languages. This is seldom the case, though, since there has been considerable resistance, especially on the part of Francophones, to learning the other national language. Even well educated Francophones object to learning Flemish, which they see as a"useless" language-- an attitude that enfuriates the Flemish. Especially among the professional classes, English, a "neutral" language which both groups are required to study in school, is sometimes used instead of Flemish or French (4).

The effects of all this linguistic tension have been difficult to cope with for the major libraries of the country.

For the libraries within Brussels, the bilingual split has meant, on the most basic level, a duplication of all work and staffing; on more philosophical levels it has changed their very reason for existing. They have become repositories of one or the other group's culture, not simply providers of information for the community as a whole. For university and public libraries elsewhere in the country, the linguistic division has cut them off from their former peers. Since the 1960's, cooperation among libraries on nation-wide projects has become virtually impossible-- such cooperation can only occur within the same linguistic community. Not only does the antagonism between the two groups preclude this, but the government funding for such projects is divided by region, and can not be combined for joint projects. The national library association is divided along linguistic lines, each having their own meetings, guidelines, newsletters, and so forth. The Belgian National Bibliography, the equivilent of the National Union Catalog, is printed in two languages. The list of similiar examples could go on-- the library world, like the rest of Belgium, is in two separate, but equal parts.

The emphasis of this discussion now shifts from a general discussion of the language dispute in Belgium to how this has affected three particular libraries, the Catholic University of Louvain, the public library of Brussels, and the Royal Library of Belgium. Of these three, the library in Louvain has probably met the most dramatic fate at the hands of linguistic separatism. The Catholic University of Louvain was, in 1966, probably the foremost academic institution in the country. Its library in particular was very good, and had a collection of 1.5 million

volumes, inspite of the destructive effects of two world wars. The University was, however, a French-language institution, in a Flemish town and region. It had been exempted from the principle of linguistic regional homogeneity which had been applied to educational institutions throughout the country, except of course in bilingual Brussels. In the fall of 1966, tension over this situation finally came to a head, though. Flemish Catholics challenged the Belgian bishops handling of the university and their attempt to maintain Francophone education in Flanders. Many placed their view of the promotion of Flemish culture above respect for separate Catholic higher education-- this in a Flanders long noted for its piety, where 75% of its children received some sort of Catholic education. As one of the student leaders put it, " I'd rather have a Flemish univeristy which is not Catholic than a Catholic university which is not Flemish"(5).

The Flemish-speaking students and faculty boycotted the opening convocation of the university in October 1966, taking the issue out of the hands of the bishops, and turning it over to the politicians and press. The Flemish/French split over the issue in the Belgian Cabinet dislocated its majority and forced its members to resign in 1968, and the resulting government voted that the university must be split along linguistic lines. In 1970, the French-speaking students and faculty were moved from Louvain, or Leuven as its Flemish partisans called it, to a new campus south of the language border, called Louvain-La-Neuve. The reknowned university library was split in half, by accession number. The even numbers stayed in the old library; the odd numbers went to the new campus. Both libraries had copies of the

original catalogs, so it was possible to order books from the other library. Both have continued to update these catalogs frequently. Now, sixteen years after the division, it is possible to find out the holdings of the Leuven library from the Louvain-La-Neuve catalog, and vice versa, and order the needed volumes for delivery in three days. The libraries have continued to cooperate with collection development, although the split has forced some duplication. The main project that they have not been able to cooperate on has been Leuven's computer catalog, called DOBIS-LIBIS, which they developed with the assistance of IBM-Belgium. Because government funds are involved with this were originally restricted to Flanders, though, it has only recently been introduced at Louvain-La-Neuve. The cooperation between these two libraries is largely the work of their respective directors, who treat the split as an unfortunate necessity with which they must work as best as possible.

Within Brussels, there are two public libraries, in theory, although in fact there is only one which functions as a public library in the true sense of the word. The irony of this lies in that this library can serve at the most only 15% of Brussel's population, since it is the library funded by the Flemish Cultural Council, and its entire collection is in Flemish, and its staff Flemish-speaking. Brussel's population is 85% Francophone, many of whom know little or no Flemish. The public library funded and run by the French Cultural Council was only open for 15 hours each week, as opposed to the Flemish library's 36, required the equivilent of a $40.00 deposit for borrowing priviledges--the Flemish library required the equivilent of around $10.00--and for the last two years has been completely

closed for repairs, with no access to the collection at all. Both libraries were founded in 1963, in the wake of the Linguistic and Education Laws. They were founded to promote the culture of their respective ethno-linguistic groups, and not as "information clearinghouses" for their communities. Thus, the Flemish library has extensive materials on Flanders, but relatively few things on Wallonia; the works of all major Flemish writers, but only Flemish translations of Francophone Belgian writers'books. The library clearly caters to those who want to find out about Flanders and things Flemish; general information for the community is secondary to this. While I was unable to visit the French library, according to its librarians, its mission was similar to that of the Flemish library. It was to promote Belgian, Francophone culture in Brussels, to be, as one of them put it, "a voice against the Flemish." It had considerably less financial resources than the Flemish library, and its collection was smaller. The collection contained only French language books, and included no Flemish writers in translation. When I met with these librarians, in February 1986, they anticipated that the library would reopen to the public by January 1988; however, there was some doubt about this because of uncertain finances (6).

A contributing factor to the weakness of the French public library in Brussels is undoubtedly the presence of the Royal Library of Belgium, the nation's only truly bilingual library. The Royal Library was founded in 1870, on the fiftieth anniversary of Belgian independence. However, for its first 90 years, it was a relatively minor institution, a part of the Royal

Archives. In 1960, it was moved into large, new building on the Mont des Arts, in the center of downtown Brussels, where it stands today. It is the national "library of record" since copies of all documents and books published in Belgium, by Belgians, or about Belgium must be deposited there. The collection now stands at four million volumes, more than twice the size of the next largest library in the country, that of the Flemish Catholic University of Leuven. It is the center of all bibliographic activity of the country, since it publishes the Belgian National Bibliography, as well being the center for the proposed cooperative computer catalog of library holdings throughout Belgium.

It is the only library in the country which is officially bilingual. Louvain and the Brussels public libraries are split by language, but at the Royal Library all services and personnel are required to be accessible to those who speak either language. That is, at least in theory. Reality is quite different. Because the library is part of the Ministry of Education, which is headed by an appointed official, the Minister of Education, all the positions in the library are appointed, rather than being filled through an open application process. Over the last ten years, the Minister of Education has been Flemish, thus most of the positions filled in the last ten years, whether for a clerical or adminstrative job, have been filled by Flemish speakers. Since these are political positions, these employees are appointed "for life," i.e. until they decide to retire. The library currently employs 250 people; of these, 170 list Flemish as their first language. While all employees of the library are required to be fluent in both languages, and to pass a test of

competency in their "second" language before accepting employment there, an unofficial tally of these 170 Flemish speakers reveals that 120 "prefer not" to use French, since they feel "less comfortable" using it than Flemish (7). This is particularly true of the younger employees of the library. On a personal level, I found that very few of the young reference assistants at the main reference desk in the library were competent French speakers. Most had been appointed in the last five years. Their supervisor, an older woman, was a Francophone, and almost always spoke with them in Flemish. In my observations, they spoke Flemish with most of the library's patrons; when they spoke French, it was with a heavy accent. Many of the department heads in the library were Francophones, left over from the era of Francophone dominance. Most of them had staffs that spoke Flemish as their first language, and they would, correspondingly, speak Flemish with them, instead of French. When I began work at the Royal Library, I had two clerical assistants to supervise. Neither spoke French, and only one spoke even a little English. They had both gotten their positions through political connections.

The Royal Library has been deep financial trouble since 1980, along with the rest of the Belgian economy. All questions of economy eventually boil down to whether they will affect the Flemish employees more than the French, or vice versa. The library currently has a hiring freeze, and is trying to reduce staff size through retirements, but is unable to fire unnecessary employees, or even reallocate them, without raising the question of linguistic discrimination. Many of the library's problems are

related to its cumbersome management, but the overriding problem is the tension between the Francophone adminstration, and the predominantly Flemish staff. What the long-term effect of this linguistic polarization will have on the library as an institution is hard to predict, but reduced and inefficient services to the public are already apparent. The library already has a reputation among students and scholars in Belgium as being slow and difficult to use. As one professor from the University of Ghent put it," It's hard to imagine it (the library services) getting worse, but it almost surely will" (8).

Bilingualism as a solution to Belgium's problems seems so simple, so easy to accept; yet language there has taken on an almost spiritual quality. It is defended obstinately because it is seen as a matter of preserving one's culture and self-respect. Yet if Belgium is to survive as a nation bilingualism must be taken seriously, and the rigid artificial barriers between Flanders and Wallonia must be broken down, albeit over generations, through the slow process of universal bilingual education. Belgium is certainly living proof that language frontiers are not natural-- where they are artificially erected, they bring more harm than protection.

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NOTES

(1) Lenz, Mary, "Setting Language Borders," The Texas Observer December 5, 1986, p.13-14.

(2) Swing, Elizabeth Sherman, "Separate but equal: an inquiry into the language controversy on education in Belgium." Western European Education 5(Winter 1973-74): 6-33.

(3) Quoted in Robert Senelle, "The Revision of the Constitution 1967-71," Memo from Belgium, p.12.

(4) Conversation with Guy Lercangee, Brussels, April 12, 1986.

(5) Quoted in Val Lorwin, "Linguistic Pluralism and Political Tension in Modern Belgium," Advances in the Sociology of Language, 2(1972): 386-412.

(6) Converation with Ariane de Leerbeeck, Brussels, February 10,1986.

(7) "Problems dans la Bibliotheque Royale." Le Soir March 22, 1985.

(8) Conversation with Kris Verslyss, Ghent, March 2, 1986.